

Purple-backed Starling *Sturnus sturninus*: a new species for Nepal

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On 10 May 2002, we saw a pair of starling-like birds at Koshi Tappu Wildlife Reserve at 75 m (26°38'N 87°00'E). The two birds were observed flying from the Koshi Camp marshes at Madhuban to a large pipal tree *Ficus religiosa* in the south-west corner of Koshi Camp. Both birds were watched from a distance of about 20 m with a 30x Optolyth telescope and 8x32 Leica binoculars. The birds were observed very well feeding on green pipal berries for about 20 mins in very good light at 06h40. They were identified as male and female Purple-backed Starling *Sturnus sturninus* using Grimmett *et al.* (1998).

One of the birds, which we presumed was a male, had the following features: the head was light grey with a dark patch on the nape; the bill was fine and dark; the mantle looked dark purple and showed a glossy tinge; the wings were glossy green-violet with two distinct white wing-bars, a small fulvous patch below the double wing-bar, and three to four white dots on the tertials; the tail was short, with white at the sides and light grey on the underside; the belly showed a small area of white; and the rump and undertail-coverts were fulvous or light brown.

The second bird, which we presumed to be a female, was very similar, but the mantle and back were duller and black-brown, and the rump and undertail-coverts were greyish-white. The birds fed silently during the period of observation.

The presence of Asian Pied Starlings *Sturnus contra* and Chestnut-tailed Starlings *Sturnus malabaricus* close to these two birds provided a good opportunity for comparison. The two Purple-backed Starlings were nearly the same size as Chestnut-tailed Starling, and much smaller than Asian Pied Starling. The lack of chestnut underparts, and the wing pattern described above, eliminated Chestnut-tailed Starling, whereas the size difference and lack of orange orbital skin, yellowish bill, and blackish head and throat eliminated Asian Pied Starling.

On 11 May 2002 at 06h40, we again saw similar birds in the same area. This time we counted five males and one female. We observed these birds at c. 2 m height, at a distance of c. 15 m with the same optical equipment. These resembled the original pair in plumage and behaviour.

These constitute the first records for Nepal. The species breeds from north-eastern Mongolia to north-eastern Russia, northern China and northern Korea, wintering in South-East Asia. Its status in Pakistan and India is described as vagrant by Grimmett *et al.* (1998).

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Red Phalarope *Phalaropus fulicaria* in Rajasthan: the second record for India

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On 7 May 1995, RGS photographed a wader on an effluent depression at Jor-Bir, near Bikaner, Rajasthan, India (28°04'N 73°23'E). At the time, the bird was identified as Red-necked Phalarope *Phalaropus lobatus*, and the print was subsequently labelled as such. The photograph was later scrutinised by HSS who reidentified the bird, with reference to Hayman *et al.* (1986) and Beaman and Madge (1998), as Red Phalarope *Phalaropus fulicaria*. Realising the rarity of the species in the Indian subcontinent, HSS sent copies of the photograph to S. Madge and K. Kazmierczak who confirmed the identity.

The forehead, throat, and underparts were white. A blackish-grey cap extended onto the hindneck, and a

dark mark through and behind the eye also extended on to the hindneck. The upperparts and wings retained some dark juvenile feathers, and the bird was aged as a first-winter by the considerable amount of grey admixed in the upperparts. The short, straight, thick bill was yellow at the base.

The Red Phalarope is a very rare bird in the Indian subcontinent, with only one record mentioned in Ali and Ripley (1980), Grimmett *et al.* (1998) and Kazmierczak and van Perlo (2000): a specimen 'in winter plumage' collected by Blyth in a Calcutta market on 11 May 1846 (Hume 1878). The species was not recorded again from the subcontinent until 1987 when an adult moulting out of breeding plumage was recorded

at Rawal Lake, Pakistan (Mallalieu 2003, this issue). Our record therefore represents only the second for India and the third for the Indian subcontinent.

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Some observations on the breeding biology of birds on Great Nicobar Island, India

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Great Nicobar Island is located between 6°45'N–7°15'N and 93°38'E–93°55'E in the Bay of Bengal, India. Although previous studies on the avifauna of the Andaman and Nicobar islands described the ecology and/or status of several species (Hume 1874, Butler 1899, Osmaston 1906, Abdulali 1979a,b, Sankaran 1995, 1998), I present here new information on the breeding biology of seven endemic subspecies and one endemic species (Nicobar Parakeet *Psittacula caniceps*) to Great Nicobar Island.

An intensive study was carried out on the coast at the southern tip of the island in a narrow strip of forest between 40 m and 300 m wide, bounded by the beach to the east and by wetlands and forests to the west. Observations were made between December 1995 and May 1998, during three dry seasons (the breeding season for most of the birds in this area) and part of one wet season. Nests were located and observed with binoculars, and monitored until chicks fledged. Where possible, nest trees were climbed and the eggs were measured with Vernier callipers and, in some cases, weighed using a 100 g spring balance. Nest height was estimated using a clinometer, and the tree species and nest materials were recorded. Conservation status is taken from BirdLife International (2000).

NICOBAR PARAKEET *Psittacula caniceps* (Near Threatened)
Two nests were located in March 1997 and 1998 in *Syzygium samarangense* and *Terminalia bialata* trees respectively. The nests were located at a height of 19.5 m and 20 m and both had clutches of two eggs. Both parents attended the nest during incubation (the male entered the nest hole but it was uncertain whether it actually carried out any incubation), and both parents fed the chicks.

LONG-TAILED PARAKEET *Psittacula longicauda* (Near Threatened)

Four nests were located between February and April in 1997–1998, in *Syzygium samarangense* (N=3) and *Terminalia bialata* (N=1) trees. The mean \pm SE nest height was 15.6 \pm 2.7 m (range: 9.5–21 m). Clutch size was two (N=1) to three eggs (N=3). Food gathered by the male was fed to the female which in turn fed it to the nestlings. The female was invariably sighted near the nest, while the male was often absent. Three nests fledged young successfully, but the fate of the fourth could not be observed.

GREEN IMPERIAL PIGEON *Ducula aenea*

Three nests were located between January and February in 1997–1998 in the canopy or subcanopy of *Terminalia catappa*, *Alstonia kurzii* and *Cocos nucifera* trees. Mean \pm SE nest height was 36 \pm 4.9 m (range: 26–39 m). Clutch size was two eggs (N=3), and mean egg size was 36.2 x 48.6 mm (N=4).

POMPADOUR GREEN PIGEON *Treron pompadora*

Five nests were located in February and March in 1996–1998 in the subcanopy of *Syzygium samarangense* (N=1) and *Macaranga peltata* trees (N=4). Mean \pm SE nest height was 6 \pm 0.8 m (range: 3.6–7 m). Nest diameter in one case was 14.3 cm. Clutch size was two eggs (N=5); mean egg dimensions were 2.7 x 3.4 mm (N=2) and mean mass was 12.3 g (N=2). Both the male and female incubated the eggs, and in one case the incubation period was 18 days. At one nest, a Nicobar Sparrowhawk *Accipiter butleri* attacked a week-old chick, which fell out of the nest and subsequently disappeared (its nest-mate survived).